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ABSTRACT

Parents of children participating in El Salvador's educational television program were interviewed in group sessions. While the parents had little specific information about education television, and thus had some fears and misconceptions, their impression of educational television, probably derived almost completely from their children's reactions, were generally favorable. Parents reported concern about the cost of schooling and pace and difficulty of lessons, but also felt that their children were more motivated and punctual than before educational television. (RH)

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PARENTS TALK ABOUT ETV IN EL SALVADOR

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Research Memorandum No. 2

This is one of a series of reports of research on the Educational Reform Program of El Salvador, and especially its use of instructional television. This report has been prepared by members of the Institute for Communication Research, Stanford University, on behalf of the Academy for Educational Development, under contract with the U.S. Agency for International Development.

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A need was felt for a brief study, carried out in the first year of ETV, of how parents felt about the new project. The evaluation group felt that because of the poor educational background of many parents, a sophisticated questionnaire or interview would not get valid results. Long individual interviews were not possible because of limited time that was available for the work. It was decided to use a group interview method on a random selection of schools and families of students taking the ETV course within those schools. The advantages would be that if the setting were sufficiently unthreatening, parents would feel freer to talk, especially after the discussion got under way. Moreover, the amount of time each session would take, would make the study practicable in the schedule of work.

The full plan of the study, the first part of which is reported here, was to study parents' opinions, values, and attitudes regarding the educational television effort, the educational reform and their own ideas about how these affected their children's education. After soliciting a spontaneous response to these questions, the plan was to attempt to give a series of informative talks about the Educational Reform and Educational Television, geared to the real needs of the parents and not simply as a public relations talk by a member of the Ministry. In this way, it was hoped that parents would have a better grasp of the real implications of the Reform and Television. A third step was to have a follow-up interview with these same groups to ascertain whether the information provided had clarified doubts, sharpened decisions and, perhaps, made parents more aware

of their own responsibilities in their children's education. If the results were positive, a similar information campaign (without interviews) was to be undertaken by the Department of Educational Television (perhaps by television programs) to give parents important information about the project at the beginning of the following year.

Thus the study had a twofold aim, one more general and another quite specific. It was felt that the reaction of parents to the new project of ETV was an important factor in itself. Still, if this information was to serve a more practical purpose other than an historical record of the first year of a television project, the researchers hoped that a more realistic information campaign might be adapted to the needs of parents and that from this starting point some kind of classes for parents might eventually be undertaken by those in charge of the project. It would do no good, they felt, to "sell" the project before the parents' real feelings about the project were known.

In carrying out the study, a random selection of 7 of the 32 classrooms in the first year's project was made. From the class lists of students in the first-year classes participating, a list of seven names was randomly selected. The parents of the children were then asked to participate in the study. Most consented to participate and actually showed up for the group interviews. The following report is based on the tape recordings of the seven groups that met over a period of about two months in May and June, 1969. Each session lasted about one hour and represents the free responses of parents to a set of predetermined questions.

The schools selected were as follows:

1. Plan Basico Republica del Uruguay. This is a "Plan Basico" only for girls. They come from a working class with permanent jobs and income only enough for basic needs and represent the middle or upper level of the working class. The school is located in the center of the city.

2. Instituto Nacional "Manuel Jose Arce". A coeducational institute -- 7-11 grades. The students come from the working class, with income lower than middle class. Many of them live in crowded one-room housing where they do not have adequate facilities for studying. The Institute is located at one side of the city where there is a concentration of working class population. Students come from the surrounding areas. Two classes -- one with TV, one without -- were selected from this school.

3. Plan Basico de Coatepeque. This school is located along the Pan American highway, 30 miles from the capital city. The area is mainly dedicated to agriculture and coffee growing. The town has about 26,000 inhabitants. Education is quite low, especially among mothers. It is coeducational.

4. Instituto National "Jose Damian Villacorta", Santa Técla. This is a large school, coeducational, and located 7.4 miles from San Salvador. It is almost a suburb of the capital city. Students come from different social classes, the most representative being the upper middle level of the working class, and middle-class professionals.

5. Escuela Experimental "Humberto Romero Alvergue". An urban school located in an area of middle social class. It is coeducational. It was created as an experimental school for new teaching methods and materials.

6. Colegio la Asuncion. This was the only private school included. It is a Catholic school for girls, run by nuns. This school is only for middle and upper class.

In each group interview, the following questions, among others, were covered by Sr. Valero, who was in charge of the meetings:

Where have you read or heard something about ETV? Where would you go to see some ETV? If you would want to find out something about ETV? Have you had any conversations with other parents about ETV?

Have your children told you anything about what is done on ETV? What? When you found out your child was going to use TV in school, but before classes started, were you pleased? Do you think ETV is good or bad? What do other people think about ETV according to their own lights? Do you think that ETV is a luxury for the rich? Do your children like to study with ETV? Do you think it is better to study with the ETV system than other systems?

Why do you think ETV was introduced into the schools?

Does ETV ruin children's eyes?

Would you like it if ETV would have classes every day for adults?

Are you acquainted with the programs that are currently being presented on ETV? If you know them, what do you think of them?

Have there been expenses for school supplies for your child on account of ETV?

Do you think that education will improve with ETV?

How much time do you talk with your child daily? Have you noticed any changes in your child since he began to study with ETV?

If you could, would you change your child to a Plan Basico without ETV?

Do your children study more with ETV? Does your child speak favorably about ETV?

Do you think that your child is learning more than before?

In attempting to ascertain the sources on which the opinions of parents about ETV were based, the investigator found an almost total lack of solid information. From the schema of the interview questions, it was assumed that parents could learn about ETV from personal contact with friends who were informed, from the mass media, from the schools themselves and from their children. The first two sources furnished little or no information to those parents in the groups. Although a few informative articles had appeared in newspapers, the general kind of notice in the paper was not of the type to provide much information about the project. The other point that must be kept in mind here is that the average educational level of most parents was relatively low and they were not used to reading much in newspapers, much less about educational matters. A few parents had read articles in newspapers. Only one had actually watched an ETV program, though they appear on a commercial channel from 8 to 11:20 every day. (From our survey data, over 40 per cent of the students in the project said they had a television set at home.) Some parents had visited classes themselves.

The two main sources of information were a talk on ETV that

some schools sponsored at the beginning of the school year for parents, and, not surprisingly, what their children had told them. The predominance of this latter source is important because a generally favorable opinion of parents probably reflects a favorable reaction of children. Here is where a word of mouth recommendation from a personal source has important consequences on opinion formation of others.

Parents in the group meetings gave different responses to the opinion questions according to their educational training and general background. Those from the more educated groups gave longer, more articulate answers; those of less educational background were briefer and less articulate. The tape recordings of the seven group dynamic sessions have provided the following summary information on parents' attitudes:

1. Parents generally thought that the purpose of the educational television project was to raise the level of education in El Salvador, make teachers' work easier and, perhaps, to meet certain political pressures.

The parents' responses reflect only a general idea of the main purpose of the ETV project and show a general lack of more precise knowledge. They do not mention the one common fear that some teachers have, that ETV will keep them from working by replacing them with machines. This line, promoted to a certain extent by a teachers' union in opposition to the present Minister of Education, does not seem to play a large part in the parents' comments. Their

perception that ETV will make the teacher's job easier is partially true but also ignores the fact that most teachers report that teaching with TV increases the amount of work they have.

2. The impression of the parents about the ETV project and its programs is generally favorable.

The parents are unanimous in their endorsement of the program as excellent. This is reassuring, especially when we consider that this is a random sample of parents and not simply those who volunteer their opinions. This general satisfaction seems to be based on reports from the children in school who are reported happy and unwilling to go back to the old system. Since parents indicated a general lack of knowledge about the project from most sources except their children, we can conclude that their impressions are the result of the children's satisfaction.

Concerning the actual subject matter taught in the program, parents had some comments and questions. They are worried a bit about overloading some classes with too much work, and in this connection they specify mathematics. This reflects similar complaints by teachers and students. In the case of math, a number of the programs in the final month of broadcasting were cut precisely to give students time to catch up on past subject matter that was covered too fast. Parents say that English is their children's favorite subject. This probably reflects their own motivation for their children to learn what is considered an important skill for future

success, but it also reflects the children's satisfaction with a series of TV programs that have motivated them to participate and study and left them with the satisfaction that they are learning something. Spanish class, on the other hand, was reported in these interviews to be failing to properly motivate the students.

Parents also have some concerns about the programs. They ask about the former separate topics of civics and ethics that have traditionally been taught. These have been merged into a single subject matter called social studies. It is interesting that concern is voiced particularly in the area of social studies where values are much more involved, at least openly, than in other subjects. This should be the most sensitive area and should continue to be so. The other worry of parents is what would happen to their children if they fail at the end of the year. This is a legitimate worry considering the sometimes high failure rates in some schools. Would they have to go back into a traditional class or stay in ETV? They will have taken a quite different course from the traditional one and would find it hard to return to it. Moreover, as the parents said, their children do not want to go back to the old way. This may act as a spur to motivate the students in the pilot program to study harder for final exams; it also may motivate parents to encourage their children to study harder at the end of the year. In some sense, we may see this concern about their child's achievement as a manifestation of need achievement in parents and child -- something that has not been traditional in Latin American societies.

3. Parents see the general results of ETV as being good, again with several exceptions.

Perhaps the most important result reported by parents is that fathers have more conversation with their children about their education. If this is an effect of the ETV project it would be a notable one. El Salvador has an illegitimacy rate that is reported to be over 50 per cent of all births. It has been traditional for mothers to be left with the burden of raising children and being responsible for their education. The fact that an equal number of fathers participated in these group meetings is in itself an indication that they are taking a greater responsibility in their children's education. We have to remember that in our sample of students for this year's pilot program, nearly 80 per cent claimed to be living in a home with a father and so our sample is not representative of the average home. Nevertheless, even in homes with fathers, these have not traditionally taken an active interest in the education of their children, leaving it largely to mother, teacher, and priest. The change reported here bears watching and further study.

There was almost unanimous agreement that the ETV program lowers cost of schooling for families. This is based on the estimate of how much books and supplies cost in the traditional secondary classes, whereas in the ETV classes the workbooks substitute for much of this. In most cases, Plan Basico students might have little opportunity to buy textbooks, but where they do, these books are expensive. The children in the ETV program now receive what is

equivalent to textbooks in all five subject matters, all at the expense of the Ministry. There is some talk about having to change this policy next year if the program is expanded from about 1,500 to about 11,000 students. The cost of the workbooks as they now are presented is estimated to be about 24 colones ($9.60) a year for all. This represents a considerable amount for many poorer families and would cause hardship for them. Reactions to having to pay for the workbooks may be strong.

Parents also reported that their children were more punctual and responsible than before. It would be an interesting point to follow up. Punctuality has not been a commonly reported characteristic in Latin cultures. The responsibility and punctuality may partly be due to a motivational factor -- students are more interested and therefore more on time and responsible. On the other hand, it would be worth trying to see if the rather hard and fast schedule of the ETV programs has some permanent effect on this behavior.

Parents lack information about the program and want it. They voiced this need in clear statements and agreed that programs for parents over television would be a welcome innovation. There are a number of advantages of such programs, one of which would be clarifying common doubts and questions like the ones raised in the group meetings. For example, some are worried about possible damage TV can cause their children's eyes. Information about this could be given to all parents at once with a weekly parents' program.